

# Politics as religion: Deconstructing political discontentment

Most Americans are deeply dissatisfied with the current political climate, disapproving of congress in record numbers, believing the country is going in the wrong direction, and voting against candidates more than for candidates. Commentators claim this resentment is caused by the ineptness of politicians and the extreme partisan nature of Washington. While it is hard to disagree with this analysis, dissatisfaction is compounded by the expanded role society has given to politics and politicians, turning politics into a surrogate religion and politicians into demigods, a position doomed to disappoint.

Catholics view this world as a temporary and flawed entity, hopefully followed by heaven, a perfect and permanent reality. The two main ideologies, conservatism and liberalism, offer a new world view, focusing purely on this world, liberals believing change can lead us to a new utopia, conservatives maintaining that change destroyed the greatness of the past. It is not immediately significant that one political philosophy is better than the other but that both hold the ultimate end to be perfecting this world and political action as the key to this perfection.

Relentlessly, political ads declare: pass this legislation, reform these taxes, repeal that law and America will be great, jobs will return, the economy will grow, and education will improve. Echoing a familiar theme, their simple political maneuvers will save the country and create an ideal state. Are Americans no longer concerned about heaven, but only about creating heaven on earth?

If an earthly utopia is the end of politics, party platforms are the new dogmas. Ironically, in an age of religious relativism and cafeteria Catholicism, people have become increasingly dogmatic in their political views, holding that taxing the rich is a panacea for all social problems or conversely that raising taxes is anathema. Unfortunately, people's faith in political theories overshadows their faith in religious doctrine.

The religious nature of politics is further evident in the veneration directed toward politicians. Conservatives typically look back in time, idolizing Reagan or the founders of the nation, and in the past election, Obama was canonized by those on the left. Devotion to politicians in speeches, television ads, and rallies has replaced honor historically given to holy individuals, which in the Catholic tradition were Jesus, Mary and the saints. As the current political race unfolds, I wonder if some Americans think they are electing a savior instead of a politician, forgetting the Messiah already came, and He was not overly concerned about the state.

Veneration for present politicians is always short lived, victims of utopian promises and the reality of our fallen existence. The demonization of politicians is a more manifest parallel between religion and present day politics. Most people do not care about devil. He has even been reinvented as a likable person in Halloween costumes, tattoos, and television shows. In contrast, subtly bring up Rick Santorum or Sarah Palin with a liberal or Barack Obama or Nancy Pelosi with a conservative. They'll become extremely agitated, visibly shaken by the mere name of a politician. They might claim they hate the person's policies and not the person, but it seems more like a deflection than their actual opinion. The objects we are called to hate - sin and Satan - are now cool, and most people's deepest hatred is reserved for individuals from the opposite political party.

The two political parties are not morally equal, and Catholics need to be politically involved, working on key social issues fundamental to our faith. I am merely pointing out that a deeper flaw exists across party lines. Politics is usurping the role of religion, maintaining that a perfect state is more important than reaching heaven, party platforms are more infallible than religious doctrine, politicians are due more veneration than God, and political rivals are more loathsome than sin.

This post started with the question of political dissatisfaction, which has been caused by the failure of politicians to meet our expectations. Critics have talked ad nauseum about politicians missing the mark, but they have been silent about how our expectations have changed. Society has turned politics into a religion, pretending it can cure all our problems, make us happy, and give us a sense of fulfillment. It cannot. Therefore, we are destined to be disappointed regardless of

the party in power.

For Catholics, this is a call to reevaluate our view of religion and politics and to look forward to a place that truly will not disappoint, to have faith in beliefs that are truly infallible, to venerate One who is truly worthy of praise, and to despise something that is truly evil.